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Creating a Campus-Wide Social Justice Movement

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Creating a Campus-Wide Social Justice Movement

Inaugural Social Justice Summit brings together campus community to plan events, research and activities to effect change



Little Roger — the mascot of RWU's Pay Attention to Roger Campaign — in front of graffiti art collaboratively created by students and Tunisian street artist Oussama Bouagila, who spoke about social justice activism via art during a visit to campus last fall through an Inclusive Excellence Mini-Grant procured by professor Autumn Quezada-Grant. Image Credit: Leah Catania '14 & Alexandria Wojtanowski '15

March 11, 2014 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – What started with a weeklong series of events and activities inspiring social awareness and activism at last fall's Social Justice Week is now reaching across campus to include more than 30 student groups, academic and administrative departments to work together on a movement creating social change and equity for all members of Roger Williams University. From courses such as Writing for Social Change to events like Leadership Unity Day, individual campus groups have already been encouraging more diversity, tolerance and cultural sensitivity – but this semester, an initiative was launched to establish a campus-wide culture of social activism and inclusion.

An effort initiated by professors Laura D'Amore and Autumn Quezada-Grant at the inaugural Social Justice Summit on March 5 – an evening of dialog and reflection on ways of bringing social change to campus – the event facilitated in re-framing the idea of social justice and how the University

community thinks about the issues within our own environment. Via intentionally guided conversations throughout the event, their goal was to not only open discourse around these issues but also launch a vision for change on campus.

"We feel passionately about the social justice lens creating campus equity and change," D'Amore says.

Thanks to event funding from an Inclusive Excellence Mini-Grant – small grant awards available to all RWU community members for a project or program that promotes diversity and inclusion – here are 10 insights about social activism shared by D'Amore and Quezada-Grant at the Social Justice Summit:

- So what, exactly, is social justice? Quezada-Grant's preferred definition is "promoting a just society by challenging injustice and valuing diversity."
- D'Amore explains that achieving equality and inclusion on campus requires "full and equal participation of all groups" within a community. It's not just up to those feeling discriminated against to try to effect change – without contribution from everyone, real change cannot take place, and it benefits all members of a community to eradicate systems of marginalization. As Martin Luther King, Jr. pronounced, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
- Every college community has inherent challenges with oppression, privilege and power accompanying the diverse backgrounds of the students who attend. D'Amore explained that education is a right for all Americans at the kindergarten through twelfth-grade level via public schools; however, matriculating to college is a privilege that not all groups can realize – it requires access to resources in order to achieve good grades (oppression and privilege) and, often, the financial capital to afford it (where power steps in).
- Try a new way of thinking about the term 'diversity' as seeing every community as *inclusionary* as opposed to *exclusionary*. "For Roger Williams, why don't we think about the diversity amongst ourselves, and imagine we're all included in this diverse environment," Quezada-Grant says. "Once you include people, you can move forward."
- Collaboration is key to social justice efforts – without the involvement of all members of a community, elements of oppression will never be rooted out. "The goal is to create a community of conscience – a university setting of people who feel included and who want to be include other people, and are very conscious about the words they use and the decisions they make," Quezada-Grant says.
- Both say that the best way to spark such a movement is through events and activities in which diversity is not only experienced but also critically reflected upon by those who attend. Thinking and processing through unfamiliar experiences changes a person's behavior and will prompt the

active practicing of these new ideas and concepts.

- That's why they offer this advice: Don't just hold an event surrounding social justice – create a directed, intentional outcome of learning where the student or faculty member is offered the opportunity to practice their newfound knowledge. "Teaching people to encounter others and learn to speak in dialog with people is very important," D'Amore says.
- There are three archetypes of people effecting social justice, D'Amore says. The 'ally for self-interest' stands up to discrimination *only* for a person that he cares about but may still victimize others. Motivated by guilt from a privileged status, the 'ally for altruism' believes she must rescue victims of oppression and will often co-opt their voice in the fight. But only the 'ally for social justice' recognizes that oppression affects all members of society and works *with* disadvantaged groups to create change.
- Though sobering to identify which of the archetypes fits each person's individual belief systems, it helps to understand how thoughts and actions shape society. "When we change the way we think, we can change the way other people think as well," D'Amore says.
- Following a brainstorming session of what each club, organization, student programming and academic department could offer as an intentional learning experience, a full year of social justice programming is in the works for the 2014-15 academic year.